

Like political leaders the world over, those of China's dramatic 20th century sought to dress in styles they anticipated would connote their authority and legitimacy to rule or signify particular ideological inflections of their rulership. As China moved from a Qing monarchy, to Asia's first and very fragile Republic, through to a communist state its leaders adopted a wide range of different fashion styles that reflect fundamental principles underlying the political culture of 20th century China.

Dressing for power

Scholars' robes, school uniforms and military attire in China

Nationalist Party, Shanghai, Women's Bureau. *Funü zazhi* (The Ladies' Journal) 10, no. 8 (1924).



LOUISE EDWARDS

Three major trends in the transformations of political dress codes emerged in China in the 20th century: the shift from an elitist, rarefied style signifying remoteness from the people to one that indicated growing proximity with and responsiveness to the people; the increasingly confident adoption and adaptation of European fashion to a new Chinese style; and the continued importance of sartorial invocations of scholarly virtue replete with their associations with wise leadership. This brief study focuses on the third aspect.

Imperial robes and scholars gowns: clothing for men in politics

For male political leaders in the early Republic the imperial court robes needed to be discarded to signify the end of the monarchy, but their replacement was a vexed issue. Antonia Finnane has noted that many anti-Qing political reformers at this time argued that a switch to European dress was a prerequisite for the formation of a democratic political system.¹ Radical reformers presumed that the international political world expected European-style formal morning and evening dress and top hats. Accordingly, a woollen three-piece

waistcoated suit was common among anti-Qing rebels like Sun Yat-sen from the late 1890s.

Yet, these men were only one part of the politically active elite. Many of their peers resisted the adoption of European formal dress for political work wear. Some saw the wholesale adoption of European style as a pathetic aping of foreign ways. This contestation is reflected in the government's August 1912 decisions on formal clothing for China's politicians. The legislation presented four different European models of suits and one Chinese option - the long scholar robes (*changpao*) with a riding

jacket (*majia*) - albeit with the addition of European bowler or top hat.² Importantly, according to Henrietta Harrison, the three European suit options were less commonly adopted than the scholar's robes - the political class largely remained in scholars' robes.³

The continued common adoption of the *changpao* well into the 20th century was by no means a simple case of men wearing the clothes already in their wardrobes. Nor can it be regarded as indicating conservatism. Verity Wilson warns against regarding the retention of the scholar's robes as "unfashionable or politically unsound".

She argues that it symbolised a quintessential 'Chineseness' at a time of "self-conscious nation building".⁴ I would go further and argue that the scholar's robe was not simply 'Chinese'; it was an important signifier of virtue gained through learning, and therefore made an important claim to legitimate exercise of both formal political power and community influence. For centuries men had gained formal government positions only after proving their moral suitability through success in Imperial examinations. Thus, while the scholar's robes were indeed identifiably 'Chinese' their appeal to scholarship drawing on centuries of Confucianism's notion

of virtuous leadership made it the most 'correct' political clothing.

Reformist politicians wearing 'changpao and bowler hat combination' could draw on both the Confucian tradition and the reformist Western-modernisation trend. A wholesale rejection of the *changpao* risked jettisoning a key sartorial symbol of legitimate power - learning. In this regard, the failure of the European political wardrobe to take hold does not derive from resistance to European domination or resistance to modernisation as it might have in other countries in Asia and the Americas; rather, it relates to their presumption that 'power dressing' in China still required the imprimatur of the scholar's robes, complete with their references to traditional learning and virtuous leadership from centuries of China's past.

School uniforms: political work wear for women

The dress styles adopted by women entering the public political stage also show the link between education and power. Politically active women adopted a school uniform-style of clothing which simultaneously signified their legitimate access to public space and their educational attainment. Winning access to education was central to the women's claims to access political power since accusations about women's widespread illiteracy and ignorance had long hampered the suffrage cause.⁵ Moreover, the girl student style indicated that its wearer was progressive but still respectable. Student status was an important driver of change for women, and the clothing emerging from the education sector served as an important political marker.

The dominant model of girls' school uniforms was the *cheongsam* or *qipao* and it became a common form of clothing for China's politically active women in the 1920s and 1930s, particularly in its looser form. Hazel Clark notes that the *qipao* was first worn among the university female set as the demand for a practical, but modest uniform for women grew.⁶ Wu Hao's study shows a picture of graduating women students in 1930 where they wear a variety of school uniform *qipao* with varying hem and sleeve lengths - all are holding newly awarded certificates.⁷

There are a number of competing explanations for the increasing appearance of the *qipao*. Finnane attributes its growing popularity from the early 1920s to a trend towards 'vestimentary androgyny'. She posits that there was a rejection of "womanhood in its 1911 guise", so that women sought to adopt a clothing style that looked more like the *changpao* scholars' robes of their brothers.⁸ Clark challenges this position and argues instead that the *qipao*'s spread reflects growing nationalism as women sought to find something essentially Chinese to wear. They sought inspiration from the *changyi* (a long- and loose-sleeved, one-piece full-length gown) worn by Manchu women. Clark argues that the spread of the *qipao* was a consequence of a nationalistic search for a modest, indigenous option for a girls' school uniform, since Western school uniforms were deemed immodest and unfeminine.⁹ Extending their points, I argue that its popularity was also directly related to the importance of education in facilitating women's entrance into public spaces. The school uniform *qipao* enabled a respectable dismantling of well-entrenched norms around the divide between private and public space that had confined women to



the private sphere. Women gained access to the public political realm without entirely compromising their virtue aided by a school uniform. This dress style was common among the women in the expanding suffrage movement through the 1920s and 1930s.¹⁰

The transgressive aspects of women's appearance in the public realm resulted in the sexualisation of the girl student and her eventual commercialisation. In 1912 *Shenbao* published a comment that "Prostitutes imitate girl students, and girl students imitate prostitutes".¹¹ The ambiguity around the public woman's moral state made girl students eye-catch-

ing, desirable and therefore also useful in advertising. Through the 1930s pictures of girl students in *qipao* were invoked to sell medicine and fabric. As the evermore figure-hugging *qipao* spread amongst the public women of the entertainment sector, advertisements for cigarettes and alcohol routinely included alluring *qipao*-clad figures. The movement of student clothing into the commercial and entertainment sectors generated no small measure of concern among the politically active sectors of society.

The anxiety generated by the cooption of the 'once-virtuous' clothing of the politically active women by the entertainment

industry and the commercial sector is clear in widespread debates about 'modern women' that circulated in the 1920s and 1930s. Political activists complained that many women adopted the external trappings of modern thinking but were simply interested in shopping. These women dressed as if they were progressive and concerned about national politics but were actually devoid of political commitment. Self-appointed moral guardians of the 'new style women' labelled these *qipao*-wearing beauties 'pseudo-modern women' and dismissed them as vain and ignorant.¹² Commerce effectively co-opted the key signifier of progressive politics - dress - as the public woman became a site

Full length qipao. *Dianying huabao* (Screen Pictorial), vol 15 (1934).

of commercial exchange rather than political radicalism.¹³

Militarised politicians

The importance of education to political dress was balanced by rising sartorial militarism. Early in the Republican period China's male political leaders often appeared in full European military regalia. The population was presented with images of alien remoteness in their leaders and these excessively decorated military clothes soon became associated with corrupt, self-aggrandisement. By the mid-1930s this ceased featuring in political leaders' clothing despite the merging of political and military roles. Instead, leaders such as Sun Yat-sen, Chiang Kai-shek and Mao Zedong emerged in simpler forms of military attire invoking their increasing proximity to the 'people'. The Sun Yat-sen suit (aka Mao suit) eventually became the communist uniform for both men and women. But, at the leadership level, the premier legitimacy of the scholar as leader remained even through to the Cultural Revolution. A widely circulated image of Mao from 1968, 'Chairman Mao goes to Anyuan', depicts a youthful Mao in a scholar's robe. At crucial junctures the balance between the Mao-suited 'soldier' and the virtuous 'scholar' reappears to reassure people of the leadership's wisdom, strength and constancy. The famous posters of Mao handing power to Hua Guofeng that carry the caption "With you in charge, I am at ease" depict the two men in Mao suits, surrounded by books, pens and sheafs of paper. The scholar performed political work well past the demise of the Imperial examination system.

Louise Edwards

University of Technology, Sydney
louise.edwards@uts.edu.au

Notes

- 1 Finnane, Antonia. 1999. 'Military Culture and Chinese Dress in the Early Twentieth Century', in *China Chic: East Meets West*, 1999. Steele, Valerie and John S. Major eds. New Haven: Yale UP.
- 2 'Canyi yuan taolun fuzhi jixiang', *Shenbao*, 14 August 1912.
- 3 Harrison, Henrietta. 2000. *The Making of the Republican Citizen*. 2000. Oxford: Oxford UP.
- 4 Wilson, Verity. 2002. 'Dressing for Leadership in China: Wives and Husbands in an Age of Revolutions', in *Gender and History* 14, no. 3.
- 5 Edwards, Louise. 'Chinese Women's Campaigns for Suffrage', in *Women's Suffrage in Asia*, Edwards, Louise and Mina Roces eds. 2004. London: RoutledgeCurzon.
- 6 Clark, Hazel. 'The Cheung Sam: Issues of Fashion and Cultural Identity', in *China Chic: East Meets West*, (as above).
- 7 Hao, Wu. 2006. *Duhui yun shang: xishuo Zhongguo funü fushi yu shenti geming*. Hong Kong: Joint Publishing.
- 8 Finnane, Antonia. 1996. 'What should Chinese Women Wear?' in *Modern China* 22, no. 2.
- 9 Clark, Hazel. 'The Cheung Sam' (as above).
- 10 Edwards, Louise. 2008. *Gender, Politics and Democracy: Women's Suffrage in China*. 2008. Stanford: Stanford UP.
- 11 'Ziyou tan', *Shenbao*, 20 March 1912.
- 12 Edwards, Louise 2000. 'Policing the Modern Woman in Republican China', *Modern China* 26, no. 2.
- 13 Johnston Laing, Ellen. 2004. *Selling Happiness: Calendar Posters and Visual Culture in Early Twentieth-century Shanghai* 2004. Honolulu: Hawaii UP.